

Matter of Fact

By Joseph Alsop

Tiddlywinks With the Estimates

THE FIRST bad bobble of the Kennedy Administration has now occurred. In a background talk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara gave a group of reporters the impression that the famous missile gap was a mere myth. Stories to this effect were published. Whereat the



Alsop

White House condemned the stories as "absolutely wrong."

Behind this mystifying episode, there are two simple sets of facts. First, the Army and the Navy have been pressing on Secretary McNamara all their customary arguments that a second-rate nuclear deterrent will be quite good enough—especially if the money saved on the deterrent is then invested in the Army and Navy. And the new Defense Secretary has not yet quite decided that the Army-Navy arguments are incorrect.

Second and far more important, one of the last efforts of the outgoing Eisenhower Administration was yet another game of tiddlywinks with the national intelligence estimate. This favorite pastime produced the usual results. The United States was made to look stronger in comparison with the Soviet Union, by the easy and wonderfully inexpensive expedient of downgrading the national estimates of Soviet strength.

In particular, the estimates of Soviet long-range missile output, which formerly showed a 3-to-1 Soviet lead in 1961, were fairly sharply downgraded. This was done on the ground that there was no evidence of "a crash program."

EVER SINCE President Eisenhower suspended the U-2 overflights, the entire evidence available to the

estimators has been what is public knowledge; plus what can easily be faked to deceive expected listeners, like interceptible communications; plus such data as agents and intelligence officers may run across while ranging through the vast and secret spaces of the Soviet Union.

Among the evidence procured by these means, the estimators found nothing to suggest intensified Soviet missile output. Furthermore, there was no available proof of active construction of more than two Soviet missile-based complexes, in Eastern Siberia. Hence the forecasts of Soviet missile output were reduced for the second year in succession, on the same argument—from lack of data that was used last time.

Even so, the revised estimates are not overly comforting. As usual, they offer the defense planners a choice between minimum, medium, and maximum figures. If the maximum figure happens to be right, the Soviets will have 600 long-range ballistic missiles with thermo-nuclear warheads in operational readiness in 1963.

Unless existing programs are increased, the U. S. will have about 200 ICBMs in firing positions by the end of 1963. Hence the maximum figure in the revised estimate still gives the same Soviet 3-to-1 lead in missile power which was so cheerfully predicted by former Secretary of Defense Neil McElroy, in his testimony admitting the existence of a missile gap. Evidently Secretary McNamara, in his talk with the reporters, had in mind the more cheering minimum of medium figures.

All this needs to be understood. It must be added, for the bleak reason that the whole system of preparing and using the estimates is close to insane. It is this system which has mouse-trapped Secretary McNamara.

THE FAULT does not lie

with the estimators, who are headed by the able CIA Director Allen W. Dulles. They do their best with the data they have in hand. But they too are trapped in the system.

Under the existing system, the persons who join in making the estimates are wrong. For viciously partisan representatives of the three armed services, each with their own special interest in each estimate, are active participants in the process.

The character of the estimate is also wrong, at least when weapons of total destruction are in question. For in such cases, the policy-makers should request estimates of the most that it seems practicable for the Soviets to do, rather than asking for guesses, however expert, as to what the Soviets are actually doing. And this is doubly true when these guesses quite heavily depend on the argument from lack of data; and the place where data has not been obtained is the grimly secretive Soviet Union.

Finally, the use made of the estimate is the wrongest thing of all. For the degree of strength this country needs should not be wholly determined by guesses of the enemy's strength. It should be determined by this country's ability to strengthen itself. An unbearable burden will always be placed on the estimators, as long as guesses about the Soviet defense effort are used as the Eisenhower Administration used them, as rigid and absolute yardsticks for the American defense effort.

Fortunately, there is significant evidence that President Kennedy and his staff have been aroused to these dangerous defects in the system that mouse-trapped Secretary McNamara. The resulting bobble has in fact produced the first order to study this system with a view to improvement.

Copyright, 1961.
New York Herald Tribune, Inc.